

The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity

by Benjamin B. Warfield

The term “Trinity” is not a Biblical term, and we are not using Biblical language when we define what is expressed by it as the doctrine that there is one only and true God, but in the unity of the Godhead there are three coeternal and coequal Persons, the same in substance but distinct in subsistence. A doctrine so defined can be spoken of as a Biblical doctrine only on the principle that the sense of Scripture is Scripture. And the definition of a Biblical doctrine in such un-Biblical language can be justified only on the principle that it is better to preserve the truth of Scripture than the words of Scripture. The doctrine of the Trinity lies in Scripture in solution; when it is crystallized from its solvent it does not cease to be Scriptural, but only comes into clearer view. Or, to speak without figure, the doctrine of the Trinity is given to us in Scripture, not in formulated definition, but in fragmentary allusions; when we assembled the *dissecta membra*¹ into their organic unity, we are not passing from Scripture, but entering more thoroughly into the meaning of Scripture. We may state the doctrine in technical terms, supplied by philosophical reflection; but the doctrine stated is a genuinely Scriptural doctrine.

In point of fact, the doctrine of the Trinity is purely a revealed doctrine. That is to say, it embodies a truth which has never been discovered, and is undiscoverable, by natural reason. With all his searching, man has not been able to find out for himself the deepest things of God. Accordingly, ethnic thought has never attained a Trinitarian conception of God, nor does any ethnic religion present in its representations of the Divine Being any analogy to the doctrine of the Trinity.

Triads of divinities, no doubt, occur in nearly all polytheistic religions, formed under very various influences. Sometimes as in the Egyptian triad of Osiris, Isis and Horus, it is the analogy of the human family with its father, mother and son which lies at their basis. Sometimes they are the effect of mere syncretism,² three deities worshipped in different localities being brought together in the common worship of all. Sometimes, as in the Hindu triad of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, they represent the cyclic movement of a pantheistic evolution, and symbolize the three stages of Being, Becoming and Dissolution. Sometimes they are the result apparently of nothing more than an odd human tendency to think in threes, which has given the number three widespread standing as a sacred number (so H. Usener). It is no more than was to be anticipated, that one or another of these triads should now and again be pointed to as the replica (or even the original) of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Gladstone found the Trinity in the Homeric mythology, the trident of Poseidon being its symbol. Hegel very naturally found it in the Hindu Trimurti, which indeed is very like his pantheizing³ notion of what the Trinity is.

Others have perceived it in the Buddhist Triratna (Soderblom); or (despite their crass dualism) in some speculations of Parseism; or, more frequently, in the notional triad of Platonism (e. g., Knapp); while Jules Martin is quite sure that it is present in Philo’s neo-Stoical doctrine of the “powers,” especially when applied to the explanation of Abraham’s three visitors. Of late years, eyes have been turned rather to Babylonia; and H. Zimmern finds a possible forerunner of the Trinity in a Father, Son, and Intercessor, which he discovers in its mythology. It should be needless to say that none of these triads has the slightest resemblance to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity embodies much more than the notion of “threeness,” and beyond their “threeness” these triads have nothing in common with it.

¹ i.e. scattered members, components, or parts; also scattered remains

² the blending of two or more religious belief systems into a new system, or the incorporation into a religious tradition of beliefs from unrelated traditions.

³ Pantheism is the doctrine that the universe is God and, conversely, that there is no god apart from the substance, forces, and laws manifested in the universe. Pantheism characterizes many Buddhist and Hindu doctrines.

As the doctrine of the Trinity is undiscoverable by reason, so it is incapable of proof from reason. There are no analogies to it in Nature, not even in the spiritual nature of man, who is made in the image of God. In His trinitarian mode of being, God is unique; and, as there is nothing in the universe like Him in this respect, so there is nothing which can help us to comprehend Him. Many attempts have, nevertheless, been made to construct a rational proof of the Trinity of the Godhead. Among these there are two which are particularly attractive, and have therefore been put forward again and again by speculative thinkers through all the Christian ages. These are derived from the implications, in the one case, of self-consciousness; in the other, of love. Both self-consciousness and love, it is said, demand for their very existence an object over against which the self stands as subject. If we conceive of God as self-conscious and loving, therefore, we cannot help conceiving of Him as embracing in His unity some form of plurality. From this general position both arguments have been elaborated, however, by various thinkers in very varied forms.

The former of them, for example, is developed by a great seventeenth century theologian – Bartholomew Keckermann (1614) – as follows: God is self-conscious thought: and God’s thought must have a perfect object, existing eternally before it; this object to be perfect must be itself God; and as God is one, this object which is God must be the God that is one. It is essentially the same argument which is popularized in a famous paragraph (73) of Lessing’s “The Education of the Human Race.” Must not God have an absolutely perfect representation of Himself – that is, a representation in which everything that is in Him is found? And would everything that is in God be found in this representation if His necessary reality were not found in it? If everything, everything without exception, that is in God is to be found in this representation, it cannot, therefore, remain a mere empty image, but must be an actual duplication of God.

It is obvious that arguments like this prove too much.⁴ If God’s representation of Himself, to be perfect, must possess the same kind of reality that He Himself possesses, it does not seem easy to deny that His representations of everything else must possess objective reality. And this would be as much as to say that the eternal objective co-existence of all that God can conceive is given in the very idea of God; and that is open pantheism. The logical flaw lies in including in the perfection of a representation qualities which are not proper to representations, however perfect. A perfect representation must, of course, have all the reality proper to a representation; but objective reality is so little proper to a representation that a representation acquiring it would cease to be a representation. This fatal flaw is not transcended, but only covered up, when the argument is compressed, as it is in most of its modern presentations, in effect to the mere assertion that the condition of self-consciousness is a real distinction between the thinking subject and the thought object, which, in God’s case, would be between the subject ego and the object ego. Why, however, we should deny to God the power of self-contemplation enjoyed by every finite spirit, save at the cost of the distinct hypostatizing⁵ of the contemplant and the contemplated self, it is hard to understand. Nor is it always clear that what we get is a distinct hypostatization rather than a distinct substantializing⁶ of the contemplant and contemplated ego: not two persons in the Godhead so much as two Gods. The discovery of the third hypostasis – the Holy Spirit – remains meanwhile, to all these attempts rationally to construct a Trinity in the Divine Being, a standing puzzle which finds only a very artificial solution.

The case is much the same with the argument derived from the nature of love. Our sympathies go out to that old Valentinian writer – possibly it was Valentinus himself – who reasoned – perhaps he was the first so to reason – that “God is all love,” “but love is not love unless there be an object of love.” And

⁴ This is true of Jonathan Edwards’ unpublished treatise on the Trinity, which is mentioned on the next page.

⁵ To make into a distinct substance; to conceive or treat as an existing being; e.g. “The pressed Newtonians... refused to hypostatize the law of gravitation into an ether.”

⁶ To make or become actual: to make something that is imaginary, theoretical, or spiritual become palpable.

they go out more richly still to Augustine, when, seeking a basis, not for a theory of emanations, but for the doctrine of the Trinity, he analyzes this love which God is into the triple implication of “the lover,” “the loved” and “the love itself,” and sees in this trinary of love an analogue of the Triune God. It requires, however, only that the argument thus broadly suggested should be developed into its details for its artificiality to become apparent. Richard of St. Victor works it out as follows: It belongs to the nature of *amor*⁷ that it should turn to another as *caritas*.⁸ This other, in God’s case, cannot be the world; since such love of the world would be inordinate. It can only be a person; and a person who is God’s equal in eternity, power and wisdom. Since, however, there cannot be two Divine substances, these two Divine persons must form one and the same substance. The best love cannot, however, confine itself to these two persons; it must become *condilectio*⁹ by the desire that a third should be equally loved as they love one another. Thus love, when perfectly conceived, leads necessarily to the Trinity, and since God is all He can be, this Trinity must be real. Modern writers (Sartorius, Schoberlein, J. Muller, Liebner, most lately R. H. Griutzmacher) do not seem to have essentially improved upon such a statement as this. And after all is said, it does not appear clear that God’s own all-perfect Being could not supply a satisfying object of His all-perfect love. To say that in its very nature love is self-communicative, and therefore implies an object other than self, seems an abuse of figurative language.

Perhaps the ontological proof of the Trinity is nowhere more attractively put than by Jonathan Edwards. The peculiarity of his presentation of it lies in an attempt to add plausibility to it by a doctrine of the nature of spiritual ideas or ideas of spiritual things, such as thought, love, fear, in general. Ideas of such things, he urges, are just repetitions of them, so that he who has an idea of any act of love, fear, anger or any other act or motion of the mind, simply so far repeats the motion in question; and if the idea be perfect and complete, the original motion of the mind is absolutely reduplicated. Edwards presses this so far that he is ready to contend that if a man could have an absolutely perfect idea of all that was in his mind at any past moment, he would really, to all intents and purposes, be over again what he was at that moment. And if he could perfectly contemplate all that is in his mind at any given moment, as it is and at the same time that it is there in its first and direct existence, he would really be two at that time, he would be twice at once: “The idea he has of himself would be himself again.” This now is the case with the Divine Being.

“God’s idea of Himself is absolutely perfect, and therefore is an express and perfect image of Him, exactly like Him in every respect... But that which is the express, perfect image of God and in every respect like Him is God, to all intents and purposes, because there is nothing wanting: there is nothing in the Deity that renders it the Deity but what has something exactly answering to it in this image, which will therefore also render that the Deity.”

The Second Person of the Trinity being thus attained, the argument advances.

“The Godhead being thus begotten of God’s loving [having?] an idea of Himself and showing forth in a distinct Subsistence or Person in that idea, there proceeds a most pure act, and an infinitely holy and sacred energy arises between the Father and the Son in mutually loving and delighting in each other.; ...The Deity becomes all act, the Divine essence itself flows out and is as it were breathed forth in love and joy. So that the Godhead therein stands forth in yet another manner of Subsistence, and there proceeds the Third Person in the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, viz., the Deity in act, for there is no other act but the act of the will.”

⁷ i.e. love; also the Roman god of love (Greek *Eros*)

⁸ i.e. charity

⁹ i.e. shared love

The inconclusiveness of the reasoning lies on the surface. The mind does not consist in its states, and the repetition of its states would not, therefore, duplicate or triplicate it. If it did, we should have a plurality of Beings, not of Persons in one Being. Neither God's perfect idea of Himself nor His perfect love of Himself reproduces Himself. He differs from His idea and His love of Himself precisely by that which distinguishes His Being from His acts. When it is said, then, that there is nothing in the Deity which renders it the Deity but what has something answering to it in its image of itself, it is enough to respond – except the Deity itself. What is wanting to the image to make it a second Deity is just objective reality.

Inconclusive as all such reasoning is, however, considered as rational demonstration of the reality of the Trinity, it is very far from possessing no value. It carries home to us in a very suggestive way the superiority of the Trinitarian conception of God to the conception of Him as an abstract monad,¹⁰ and thus brings important rational support to the doctrine of the Trinity, when once that doctrine has been given us by revelation. If it is not quite possible to say that we cannot conceive of God as eternal self-consciousness and eternal love, without conceiving Him as a Trinity, it does seem quite necessary to say that when we conceive Him as a Trinity, new fullness, richness, force are given to our conception of Him as a self-conscious, loving Being, and therefore we conceive Him more adequately than as a monad, and no one who has ever once conceived Him as a Trinity can ever again satisfy himself with a monadistic conception of God. Reason thus not only performs the important negative service to faith in the Trinity, of showing the self-consistency of the doctrine and its consistency with other known truth, but brings this positive rational support to it of discovering in it the only adequate conception of God as self-conscious spirit and living love. Difficult, therefore, as the idea of the Trinity in itself is, it does not come to us as an added burden upon our intelligence; it brings us rather the solution of the deepest and most persistent difficulties in our conception of God as infinite moral Being, and illuminates, enriches and elevates all our thought of God. It has accordingly become a commonplace to say that Christian theism is the only stable theism. That is as much as to say that theism requires the enriching conception of the Trinity to give it a permanent hold upon the human mind – the mind finds it difficult to rest in the idea of an abstract unity for its God; and that the human heart cries out for the living God in whose Being there is that fullness of life for which the conception of the Trinity alone provides.

So strongly is it felt in wide circles that a Trinitarian conception is essential to a worthy idea of God, that there is abroad a deep-seated unwillingness to allow that God could ever have made Himself known otherwise than as a Trinity. From this point of view it is inconceivable that the Old Testament revelation should know nothing of the Trinity. Accordingly, I. A. Dorner, for example, reasons thus:

“If, however – and this is the faith of universal Christendom – a living idea of God must be thought in some way after a Trinitarian fashion, it must be antecedently probable that traces of the Trinity cannot be lacking in the Old Testament, since its idea of God is a living or historical one.”

Whether there really exist traces of the idea of the Trinity in the Old Testament, however, is a nice question. Certainly we cannot speak broadly of the revelation of the doctrine of the Trinity in the Old Testament. It is a plain matter of fact that none who have depended on the revelation embodied in the Old Testament alone have ever attained to the doctrine of the Trinity. It is another question, however, whether there may not exist in the pages of the Old Testament turns of expression or records of occurrences in which one already acquainted with the doctrine of the Trinity may fairly see indications of an underlying implication of it. The older writers discovered intimations of the Trinity in such phenomena as the plural form of the Divine name Elohim, the occasional employment with reference to God of plural pronouns (“Let us make man in our image,” Gen. 1:26; 3:22; 11:7; Isa. 6:8), or of plural verbs (Gen. 20:13; 35:7), certain repetitions of the name of God which seem to distinguish between God and God (Ps.45:6, 7; 110:1; Hos. 1:7), threefold liturgical formulas Num. 6:24, 26; Isa. 6:3), a certain tendency to hypostatize

¹⁰ A *monad* is an indivisible, impenetrable unit of substance – a single entity, as opposed to a dyad (2), triad (3), etc.

the conception of Wisdom (Prov. 8), and especially the remarkable phenomena connected with the appearances of the Angel of Jehovah (Gen. 16:2-13, 22:11,16; 31:11,13; 48:15,16; Ex. 3:2, 4, 5; Jdgs. 13:20-22).

The tendency of more recent authors is to appeal, not so much to specific texts of the Old Testament, as to the very “organism of revelation” in the Old Testament in which there is perceived an underlying suggestion “that all things owe their existence and persistence to a threefold cause,” both with reference to the first creation, and, more plainly, with reference to the second creation. Passages like Ps. 33:6; Isa. 41:1; 63:9-12 Hag. 2:5, 6, in which God and His Word and His Spirit are brought together, co-causes of effects, are adduced. A tendency is pointed out to hypostatize the Word of God on the one hand (e.g., Gen. 1:3; Ps. 33:6; 107:20; 147:15-18 Isa. 55:11); and, especially in Ezek. and the later Prophets, the Spirit of God, on the other (e. g., Gen. 1:2; Isa. 48:16; 63:10; Ezek. 2:2; 8:3; Zec. 7:12). Suggestions – in Isa. for instance (7:14; 9:6) – of the Deity of the Messiah are appealed to. And if the occasional occurrence of plural verbs and pronouns referring to God, and the plural form of the name Elohim are not insisted upon as in themselves evidence of a multiplicity in the Godhead, yet a certain weight is lent them as witnesses that “the God of revelation is no abstract unity, but the living, true God who in the fullness of His life embraces the highest variety” (Bavinck). The upshot of it all is that it is very generally felt that, somehow, in the Old Testament development of the idea of God there is a suggestion that the Deity is not a simple monad, and that thus a preparation is made for the revelation of the Trinity yet to come.

It would seem clear that we must recognize in the Old Testament doctrine of the relation of God to His revelation by the creative Word and the Spirit, at least the germ of the distinctions in the Godhead afterward fully made known in the Christian revelation. And we can scarcely stop there. After all is said, in the light of the later revelation, the Trinitarian interpretation remains the most natural one of the phenomena which the older writers frankly interpreted as intimations of the Trinity; especially of those connected with the descriptions of the Angel of Jehovah no doubt, but also even of such a form of expression as meets us in the “Let us make man in our image” of Gen. 1:26 – for surely verse 27: “And God created man in his own image,” does not encourage us to take the preceding verse as announcing that man was to be created in the image of the angels. This is not an illegitimate reading of New Testament ideas back into the text of the Old Testament; it is only reading the text of the Old Testament under the illumination of the New Testament revelation. The Old Testament may be likened to a chamber richly furnished but dimly lighted; the introduction of light brings into it nothing which was not in it before; but it brings out into clearer view much of what is in it but was only dimly or even not at all perceived before. The mystery of the Trinity is not revealed in the Old Testament; but the mystery of the Trinity underlies the Old Testament revelation, and here and there almost comes into view. Thus the Old Testament revelation of God is not corrected by the fuller revelation which follows it, but only perfected, extended and enlarged.

It is an old saying that what becomes patent in the New Testament was latent in the Old Testament. And it is important that the continuity of the revelation of God contained in the two Testaments should not be overlooked or obscured. If we find some difficulty in perceiving for ourselves, in the Old Testament, definite points of attachment for the revelation of the Trinity, we cannot help perceiving with great clearness in the New Testament abundant evidence that its writers felt no incongruity whatever between their doctrine of the Trinity and the Old Testament conception of God. The New Testament writers certainly were not conscious of being “setters forth of strange gods.” To their own apprehension they worshipped and proclaimed just the God of Israel; and they laid no less stress than the Old Testament itself upon His unity (Jn. 17:3; 1Cor. 8:4; 1Tim. 2:5). They do not, then, place two new gods by the side of Jehovah as alike with Him to be served and worshipped; they conceive Jehovah as Himself at once Father, Son and Spirit. In presenting this one Jehovah as Father, Son and Spirit, they do not even betray any lurking feeling that they are making innovations. Without apparent misgiving they take over Old Testament passages and apply them to Father, Son and Spirit indifferently. Obviously they

understand themselves, and wish to be understood, as setting forth in the Father, Son and Spirit just the one God that the God of the Old Testament revelation is; and they are as far as possible from recognizing any breach between themselves and the Fathers in presenting their enlarged conception of the Divine Being. This may not amount to saying that they saw the doctrine of the Trinity everywhere taught in the Old Testament. It certainly amounts to saying that they saw the Triune God whom they worshipped in the God of the Old Testament revelation, and felt no incongruity in speaking of their Triune God in the terms of the Old Testament revelation. The God of the Old Testament was their God, and their God was a Trinity, and their sense of the identity of the two was so complete that no question as to it was raised in their minds.

The simplicity and assurance with which the New Testament writers speak of God as a Trinity have, however, a further implication. If they betray no sense of novelty in so speaking of Him, this is undoubtedly in part because it was no longer a novelty so to speak of Him. It is clear, in other words, that, as we read the New Testament, we are not witnessing the birth of a new conception of God. What we meet with in its pages is a firmly established conception of God underlying and giving its tone to the whole fabric. It is not in a text here and there that the New Testament bears its testimony to the doctrine of the Trinity. The whole book is Trinitarian to the core; all its teaching is built on the assumption of the Trinity; and its allusions to the Trinity are frequent, cursory, easy and confident. It is with a view to the cursoriness of the allusions to it in the New Testament that it has been remarked that “the doctrine of the Trinity is not so much heard as overheard in the statements of Scripture.” It would be more exact to say that it is not so much inculcated as presupposed. The doctrine of the Trinity does not appear in the New Testament in the making, but as already made. It takes its place in its pages, as Gunkel phrases it, with an air almost of complaint, already “in full completeness” (*vollig fertig*), leaving no trace of its growth. “There is nothing more wonderful in the history of human thought,” says Sanday, with his eye on the appearance of the doctrine of the Trinity in the New Testament, “than the silent and imperceptible way in which this doctrine, to us so difficult, took its place without struggle – and without controversy – among accepted Christian truths.” The explanation of this remarkable phenomenon is, however, simple. Our New Testament is not a record of the development of the doctrine or of its assimilation. It everywhere presupposes the doctrine as the fixed possession of the Christian community; and the process by which it became the possession of the Christian community lies behind the New Testament.

We cannot speak of the doctrine of the Trinity, therefore, if we study exactness of speech, as revealed in the New Testament, any more than we can speak of it as revealed in the Old Testament. The Old Testament was written before its revelation; the New Testament after it. The revelation itself was made not in word but in deed. It was made in the incarnation of God the Son, and the outpouring of God the Holy Spirit. The relation of the two Testaments to this revelation is in the one case that of preparation for it, and in the other that of product of it. The revelation itself is embodied just in Christ and the Holy Spirit. This is as much as to say that the revelation of the Trinity was incidental to, and the inevitable effect of, the accomplishment of redemption. It was in the coming of the Son of God in the likeness of sinful flesh to offer Himself a sacrifice for sin; and in the coming of the Holy Spirit to convict the world of sin, of righteousness and of judgment, that the Trinity of Persons in the Unity of the Godhead was once for all revealed to men. Those who knew God the Father, who loved them and gave His own Son to die for them; and the Lord Jesus Christ, who loved them and delivered Himself up an offering and sacrifice for them; and the Spirit of Grace, who loved them and dwelt within them a power not themselves, making for righteousness, knew the Triune God and could not think or speak of God otherwise than as triune. The doctrine of the Trinity, in other words, is simply the modification wrought in the conception of the one only God by His complete revelation of Himself in the redemptive process. It necessarily waited, therefore, upon the completion of the redemptive process for its revelation, and its revelation, as necessarily, lay complete in the redemptive process.

From this central fact we may understand more fully several circumstances connected with the revelation of the Trinity to which allusion has been made. We may from it understand, for example, why the Trinity was not revealed in the Old Testament. It may carry us a little way to remark, as it has been customary to remark since the time of Gregory of Nazianzus, that it was the task of the Old Testament revelation to fix firmly in the minds and hearts of the people of God the great fundamental truth of the unity of the Godhead; and it would have been dangerous to speak to them of the plurality within this unity until this task had been fully accomplished. The real reason for the delay in the revelation of the Trinity, however, is grounded in the secular development of the redemptive purpose of God: the times were not ripe for the revelation of the Trinity in the unity of the Godhead until the fullness of the time had come for God to send forth His Son unto redemption, and His Spirit unto sanctification.

The revelation in word must needs wait upon the revelation in fact, to which it brings its necessary explanation, no doubt, but from which also it derives its own entire significance and value. The revelation of a Trinity in the Divine unity as a mere abstract truth without relation to manifested fact, and without significance to the development of the kingdom of God, would have been foreign to the whole method of the Divine procedure as it lies exposed to us in the pages of Scripture. Here the working-out of the Divine purpose supplies the fundamental principle to which all else, even the progressive stages of revelation itself, is subsidiary; and advances in revelation are ever closely connected with the advancing accomplishment of the redemptive purpose. We may understand also, however, from the same central fact, why it is that the doctrine of the Trinity lies in the New Testament rather in the form of allusions than in express teaching, why it is rather everywhere presupposed, coming only here and there into incidental expression, than formally inculcated. It is because the revelation, having been made in the actual occurrences of redemption, was already the common property of all Christian hearts. In speaking and writing to one another, Christians, therefore, rather spoke out of their common Trinitarian consciousness, and reminded one another of their common fund of belief, than instructed one another in what was already the common property of all. We are to look for, and we shall find, in the New Testament allusions to the Trinity, rather evidence of how the Trinity, believed in by all, was conceived by the authoritative teachers of the church, than formal attempts, on their part, by authoritative declarations, to bring the church into the understanding that God is a Trinity.

The fundamental proof that God is a Trinity is supplied thus by the fundamental revelation of the Trinity in fact: that is to say, in the incarnation of God the Son and the outpouring of God the Holy Spirit. In a word, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are the fundamental proof of the doctrine of the Trinity. This is as much as to say that all the evidence of whatever kind, and from whatever source derived, that Jesus Christ is God manifested in the flesh, and that the Holy Spirit is a Divine Person, is just so much evidence for the doctrine of the Trinity; and that when we go to the New Testament for evidence of the Trinity we are to seek it; not merely in the scattered allusions to the Trinity as such, numerous and instructive as they are, but primarily in the whole mass of evidence which the New Testament provides of the Deity of Christ and the Divine personality of the Holy Spirit. When we have said this, we have said in effect that the whole mass of the New Testament is evidence for the Trinity. For the New Testament is saturated with evidence of the Deity of Christ and the Divine personality of the Holy Spirit. Precisely what the New Testament is, is the documentation of the religion of the incarnate Son and of the outpoured Spirit, that is to say, of the religion of the Trinity, and what we mean by the doctrine of the Trinity is nothing but the formulation in exact language of the conception of God presupposed in the religion of the incarnate Son and outpoured Spirit.

We may analyze this conception and adduce proof for every constituent element of it from the New Testament declarations. We may show that the New Testament everywhere insists on the unity of the Godhead; that it constantly recognizes the Father as God, the Son as God and the Spirit as God; and that it cursorily presents these three to us as distinct Persons. It is not necessary, however, to enlarge here on facts so obvious. We may content ourselves with simply observing that to the New Testament there is

but one only living and true God; but that to it Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are each God in the fullest sense of the term; and yet Father, Son and Spirit stand over against each other as I, and You, and He. In this composite fact the New Testament gives us the doctrine of the Trinity. For the doctrine of the Trinity is but the statement in well guarded language of this composite fact. Throughout the whole course of the many efforts to formulate the doctrine exactly, which have followed one another during the entire history of the church, indeed, the principle which has ever determined the result has always been determination to do justice in conceiving the relations of God the Father, God the Son and God the Spirit, on the one hand to the unity of God, and, on the other, to the true Deity of the Son and Spirit and their distinct personalities. **When we have said these three things, then – that there is but one God, that the Father and the Son and the Spirit is each God, that the Father and the Son and the Spirit is each a distinct person – we have enunciated the doctrine of the Trinity in its completeness.**

That this doctrine underlies the whole New Testament as its constant presupposition and determines everywhere its forms of expression is the primary fact to be noted. We must not omit explicitly to note, however, that it now and again also, as occasion arises for its incidental enunciation, comes itself to expression in more or less completeness of statement. The passages in which the three Persons of the Trinity are brought together are much more numerous than, perhaps, is generally supposed; but it should be recognized that the formal collocation of the elements of the doctrine naturally is relatively rare in writings which are occasional in their origin and practical rather than doctrinal in their immediate purpose. The three Persons already come into view as Divine Persons in the annunciation of the birth of Our Lord: ‘The Holy Ghost shall come upon you,’ said the angel to Mary, ‘and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you: wherefore also the holy thing which is to be born shall be called the Son of God; (Lk. 1:35 ff.; cf. Mt. 1:18 ff.).

Here the Holy Ghost is the active agent in the production of an effect which is also ascribed to the power of the Most High, and the child thus brought into the world is given the great designation of “Son of God.” The three Persons are just as clearly brought before us in the account of Mt. (1:18 ff.), though the allusions to them are dispersed through a longer stretch of narrative, in the course of which the Deity of the child is twice intimated (ver. 21: ‘It is He that shall save His people from their sins’; ver. 23: ‘They shall call His name Immanuel; which is, being interpreted, God-with-us’). In the baptismal scene which finds record by all the evangelists at the opening of Jesus’ ministry (Mt. 3:16, 17; Mk. 1:10, 11; Lk. 3:21, 22; Jn. 1:32-34), the three Persons are thrown up to sight in a dramatic picture in which the Deity of each is strongly emphasized. From the open heavens the Spirit descends in visible form, and ‘a voice came out of the heavens, you are my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased.’ Thus care seems to have been taken to make the advent of the Son of God into the world the revelation also of the Triune God, that the minds of men might as smoothly as possible adjust themselves to the preconditions of the Divine redemption which was in process of being wrought out.

With this as a starting-point, the teaching of Jesus is Trinitarianly conditioned throughout. He has much to say of God His Father, from whom as His Son He is in some true sense distinct, and with whom He is in some equally true sense one. And He has much to say of the Spirit, who represents Him as He represents the Father, and by whom He works as the Father works by Him. It is not merely in the Gospel of John that such representations occur in the teaching of Jesus. In the Synoptics, too, Jesus claims a Sonship to God which is unique (Mt. 11:27; 24:36; Mk. 13:32; Lk. 10:22; in the following passages the title of “Son of God” is attributed to Him and accepted by Him: Mt. 4:6; 8:29; 14:33; 27:40, 43, 54; Mk. 3:11; 15:39; Lk. 4:41; 22:70; cf. Jn. 1:34, 49; 9:35; 11:27), and which involves an absolute community between the two in knowledge, say, and power: both Mt. (11:27) and Lk. (10:22) record His great declaration that He knows the Father and the Father knows Him with perfect mutual knowledge: “No one knows the Son, save the Father; neither does any know the Father, save the Son.” In the Synoptics, too, Jesus speaks of employing the Spirit of God Himself for the performance of His works, as if the activities

of God were at His disposal: “I by the Spirit of God” – or as Luke has it, “by the finger of God” – “cast out demons” (Mt. 12:28; Lk. 11:20; cf. the promise of the Spirit in Mk. 13:11; Lk. 12:12).

It is in the discourses recorded in John, however, that Jesus most copiously refers to the unity of Himself, as the Son, with the Father, and to the mission of the Spirit from Himself as the dispenser of the Divine activities. Here He not only with great directness declares that He and the Father are one (10:30; cf. 12:11, 21, 22, 25) with a unity of interpenetration (“The Father is in me, and I in the Father,” 10:38; cf. 16:10, 11), so that to have seen Him was to have seen the Father (14:9; cf. 15:21); but He removes all doubt as to the essential nature of His oneness with the Father by explicitly asserting His eternity (“Before Abraham was born, I am,” Jn. 8:58), His co-eternity with God (“had with you before the world was,” 17:5; cf. 17:18; 6:62), His eternal participation in the Divine glory itself (“the glory which I had with you,” in fellowship, community with You “before the world was,” 17:5). So clear is it that in speaking currently of Himself as God’s Son (5:25; 9:35; 11:4; cf. 10:36), He meant, in accordance with the underlying significance of the idea of sonship in Semitic speech (founded on the natural implication that whatever the father is that the son is also; cf. 16:15; 17:10), to make Himself, as the Jews with exact appreciation of His meaning perceived, “equal with God” (5:18), or, to put it brusquely, just “God” (10:33). How He, being thus equal or rather identical with God, was in the world, He explains as involving a coming forth on His part, not merely from the presence of God (16:30; cf. 13:3) or from fellowship with God (16:27; 17:8), but from out of God Himself (8:42; 16:28). And in the very act of thus asserting that His eternal home is in the depths of the Divine Being, He throws up, into as strong an emphasis as stressed pronouns can convey, His personal distinctness from the Father. ‘If God were your Father,’ says He (8:42), ‘you would love me: for I came forth and am come out of God; for neither have I come of myself, but it was He that sent me.’ Again, He says (16:26, 27): ‘In that day you shall ask in my name: and I say not unto you that I will make request of the Father for you; for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved me, and have believed that it was from fellowship with the Father that I came forth; I came from out of the Father, and have come into the world.’ Less pointedly, but still distinctly, He says again (17:8): ‘They know of a truth that it was from fellowship with You that I came forth, and they believed that it was you that did send me.’

It is not necessary to illustrate more at large a form of expression so characteristic of the discourses of Our Lord recorded by John that it meets us on every page: a form of expression which combines a clear implication of a unity of Father and Son which is identity of Being, and an equally clear implication of a distinction of Person between them such as allows not merely for the play of emotions between them, as, for instance, of love (17:24; cf. 15:9 [3:35]; 14:31), but also of an action and reaction upon one another which argues a high measure, if not of exteriority, yet certainly of exteriorization. Thus, to instance only one of the most outstanding facts of Our Lord’s discourses (not indeed confined to those in John’s Gospel, but found also in His sayings recorded in the Synoptists,¹¹ as e.g., Lk. 4:43 [cf. Mk. 1:38]; 9:48; 10:16; 4:34; 5:32; 7:19; 19:10), He continually represents Himself as on the one hand sent by God, and as, on the other, having come forth from the Father (e. g., Jn. 8:42; 10:36; 17:3; 5:23).

It is more important to point out that these phenomena of interrelationship are not confined to the Father and Son, but are extended also to the Spirit. Thus, for example, in a context in which Our Lord had emphasized in the strongest manner His own essential unity and continued interpenetration with the Father (“If you had known me, you would have known my Father also”; “He that has seen me has seen the Father”; ... “I am in the Father, and the Father in me ; “The Father abiding in me does his works,” Jn. 14:7, 9, 10), we read as follows (Jn. 14:16-26): ‘And I will make request of the Father, and He shall give you another [thus sharply distinguished from Our Lord as a distinct Person] Advocate, that He may be with you forever, the Spirit of Truth...He abides with you and shall be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I come unto you. . . In that day you shall know that I am in the Father....If a man loves me, he

¹¹ i.e. one of the writers of the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, or Luke - WHG.

will keep my word; and my Father will love him and we [that is, both Father and Son] will come unto him and make our abode with him....These things have I spoken unto you while abiding with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, He shall teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said unto you.’ It would be impossible to speak more distinctly of three who were yet one. The Father, Son and Spirit are constantly distinguished from one another – the Son makes request of the Father, and the Father in response to this request gives an Advocate, “another” than the Son, who is sent in the Son’s name. And yet the oneness of these three is so kept in sight that the coming of this “another Advocate” is spoken of without embarrassment as the coming of the Son Himself (vss. 18, 19, 20, 21), and indeed as the coming of the Father and the Son (ver. 23).

There is a sense, then, in which, when Christ goes away, the Spirit comes in His stead; there is also a sense in which, when the Spirit comes, Christ comes in Him; and with Christ’s coming the Father comes too. There is a distinction between the Persons brought into view; and with it an identity among them; for both of which allowance must be made. The same phenomena meet us in other passages. Thus, we read again (15:26):’ But when there is come the Advocate whom I will send unto you from [fellowship with] the Father, the Spirit of Truth, which goes forth from [fellowship with] the Father, He shall bear witness of me.’ In the compass of this single verse, it is intimated that the Spirit is personally distinct from the Son, and yet, like Him, has His eternal home (in fellowship) with the Father, from whom He, like the Son, comes forth for His saving work, being sent thereunto, however, not in this instance by the Father, but by the Son.

This last feature is even more strongly emphasized in yet another passage in which the work of the Spirit in relation to the Son is presented as closely parallel with the work of the Son in relation to the Father (16:5 ff.) . ‘But now I go unto Him that sent me....Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is expedient for you that I go away; for, if I go not away the Advocate will not come unto you; but if I go I will send Him unto you. And He, after He is come, will convict the world..of righteousness because I go to the Father and you behold me no more....I have yet many things to say unto you, but you cannot bear them now. Howbeit when He, the Spirit of truth is come, He shall guide you into all the truth; for He shall not speak from Himself; but whatever things He shall hear, He shall speak, and He shall declare unto you the things that are to come. He shall glorify me: for He shall take of mine and shall show it unto you. All things whatsoever the Father has are mine: therefore said I that He takes of mine, and shall declare it unto you.’ Here the Spirit is sent by the Son, and comes in order to complete and apply the Son’s work, receiving His whole commission from the Son – not, however, in derogation of the Father, because when we speak of the things of the Son, that is to speak of the things of the Father.

It is not to be said, of course, that the doctrine of the Trinity is formulated in passages like these, with which the whole mass of Our Lord’s discourses in John are strewn; but it certainly is presupposed in them, and that is, considered from the point of view of their probative force, even better. As we read we are kept in continual contact with three Persons who act, each as a distinct person, and yet who are in a deep, under lying sense, one. There is but one God – there is never any question of that – and yet this Son who has been sent into the world by God not only represents God but is God, and this Spirit whom the Son has in turn sent unto the world is also Himself God. Nothing could be clearer than that the Son and Spirit are distinct Persons, unless indeed it be that the Son of God is just God the Son and the Spirit of God just God the Spirit.

Meanwhile, the nearest approach to a formal announcement of the doctrine of the Trinity which is recorded from Our Lord’s lips, or, perhaps we may say, which is to be found in the whole compass of the New Testament, has been preserved for us, not by John, but by one of the synoptists. It too, however, is only incidentally introduced, and has for its main object something very different from formulating the doctrine of the Trinity. It is embodied in the great commission which the resurrected Lord gave His disciples to be their “marching orders” “even unto the end of the world”: “Go you therefore, and make

disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 28:19). In seeking to estimate the significance of this great declaration, we must bear in mind the high solemnity of the utterance, by which we are required to give its full value to every word of it. Its phrasing is in any event, however, remarkable. It does not say, “In the names [plural] of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost”; nor yet (what might be taken to be equivalent to that), “In the name of the Father, and in the name of the Son, and in the name of the Holy Ghost,” as if we had to deal with three separate Beings. Nor, on the other hand, does it say, “In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost,” as if “the Father, Son and Holy Ghost” might be taken as merely three designations of a single person.

With stately impressiveness it asserts the unity of the three by combining them all within the bounds of the single Name; and then throws up into emphasis the distinctness of each by introducing them in turn with the repeated article: “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (Authorized Version). These three, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, each stand in some clear sense over against the others in distinct personality: these three, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, all unite in some profound sense in the common participation of the one Name. Fully to comprehend the implication of this mode of statement, we must bear in mind, further, the significance of the term, “the name,” and the associations laden with which it came to the recipients of this commission. For the Hebrew did not think of the name, as we are accustomed to do, as a mere external symbol; but rather as the adequate expression of the innermost being of its bearer. In His name the Being of God finds expression; and the Name of God – “this glorious and fearful name, Jehovah your God” (Deut. 28:58) – was accordingly a most sacred thing, being indeed virtually equivalent to God Himself. It is no solecism, therefore, when we read (Isa. 30:27), “Behold, the name of Jehovah comes”; and the parallelisms are most instructive when we read (Isa. 59:19): ‘So shall they fear the Name of Jehovah from the west, and His glory from the rising of the sun; for He shall come as a stream pent in which the Spirit of Jehovah drives.’ So pregnant was the implication of the Name, that it was possible for the term to stand absolutely, without adjunction of the name itself, as the sufficient representative of the majesty of Jehovah: it was a terrible thing to ‘blaspheme the Name’ (Lev. 24:11). All those over whom Jehovah’s Name was called were His, His possession to whom He owed protection.

It is for His Name’s sake, therefore, that afflicted Judah cries to the Hope of Israel, the Savior thereof in time of trouble: ‘O Jehovah, you are in the midst of us, and your Name is called upon us; leave us not’ (Jer. 14:9); and His people find the appropriate expression of their deepest shame in the lament, ‘We have become as they over whom you never barest rule; as they upon whom your Name was not called’ (Isa. 63:19); while the height of joy is attained in the cry, ‘Your Name, Jehovah, God of Hosts, is called upon me’ (Jer. 15:16; cf. 2Chron. 7:14; Dan. 9:18, 19). When, therefore, Our Lord commanded His disciples to baptize those whom they brought to His obedience “into the name of...,” He was using language charged to them with high meaning. He could not have been understood otherwise than as substituting for the Name of Jehovah this other Name “of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost”; and this could not possibly have meant to His disciples anything else than that Jehovah was now to be known to them by the new Name, of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. The only alternative would have been that, for the community which He was founding, Jesus was supplanting Jehovah by a new God; and this alternative is no less than monstrous. There is no alternative, therefore, to understanding Jesus here to be giving for His community a new Name to Jehovah and that new Name to be the threefold Name of “the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost.” Nor is there room for doubt that by “the Son” “in this threefold Name, He meant just Himself with all the implications of distinct personality which this carries with it; and, of course, that further carries with it the equally distinct personality of “the Father” and “the Holy Ghost,” with whom “the Son” is here associated, and from whom alike “the Son” is here distinguished.

This is a direct ascription to Jehovah the God of Israel, of a threefold personality, and is therewith the direct enunciation of the doctrine of the Trinity. We are not witnessing here the birth of the doctrine of

the Trinity; that is presupposed. What we are witnessing is the authoritative announcement of the Trinity as the God of Christianity by its Founder, in one of the most solemn of His recorded declarations. Israel had worshipped the one only true God under the Name of Jehovah; Christians are to worship the same one only and true God under the Name of “the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost.” This is the distinguishing characteristic of Christians; and that is as much as to say that the doctrine of the Trinity is, according to Our Lord’s own apprehension of it, the distinctive mark of the religion which He founded.

A passage of such range of implication has, of course, not escaped criticism and challenge. An attempt which cannot be characterized as other than frivolous has even been made to dismiss it from the text of Matthew’s Gospel. Against this, the whole body of external evidence cries out; and the internal evidence is of itself not less decisive to the same effect. When the “universalism,” “ecclesiasticism,” and “high theology” of the passage are pleaded against its genuineness, it is forgotten that to the Jesus of Matthew there are attributed not only such parables as those of the Leaven and the Mustard Seed, but such declarations as those contained in 8:11,12; 21:43; 24:14; that in this Gospel alone is Jesus recorded as speaking familiarly about His church (16:18; 18:17); and that, after the great declaration of 11:27 ff., nothing remained in lofty attribution to be assigned to Him. When these same objections are urged against recognizing the passage as an authentic saying of Jesus’ own, it is quite obvious that the Jesus of the evangelists cannot be in mind. The declaration here recorded is quite in character with the Jesus of Matthew’s Gospel, as has just been intimated; and no less with the Jesus of the whole New Testament transmission. It will scarcely do, first to construct *a priori* a Jesus to our own liking, and then to discard as “unhistorical” all in the New Testament transmission which would be unnatural to such a Jesus. It is not these discarded passages but our *a priori* Jesus which is unhistorical. In the present instance, moreover, the historicity of the assailed saying is protected by an important historical relation in which it stands. It is not merely Jesus who speaks out of a Trinitarian consciousness, but all the New Testament writers as well. The universal possession by His followers of so firm a hold on such a doctrine requires the assumption that some such teaching as is here attributed to Him was actually contained in Jesus’ instructions to His followers. Even had it not been attributed to Him in so many words by the record, we should have had to assume that some such declaration had been, made by Him. In these circumstances, there can be no good reason to doubt that it was made by Him, when it is expressly attributed to Him by the record.

When we turn from the discourses of Jesus to the writings of His followers with a view to observing how the assumption of the doctrine of the Trinity underlies their whole fabric also, we naturally go first of all to the letters of Paul. Their very mass is impressive; and the definiteness with which their composition within a generation of the death of Jesus may be fixed adds importance to them as historical witnesses. Certainly they leave nothing to be desired in the richness of their testimony to the Trinitarian conception of God which underlies them. Throughout the whole series, from 1Th., which comes from about 52 A.D., to 2Tim., which was written about 68 A.D., the redemption, which it is their one business to proclaim and commend, and all the blessings which enter into it or accompany it are referred consistently to a threefold Divine causation. Everywhere, throughout their pages, God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit appear as the joint objects of all religious adoration, and the conjunct source of all Divine operations.

In the freedom of the allusions which are made to them, now and again one alone of the three is thrown up into prominent view; but more often two of them are conjoined in thanksgiving or prayer; and not infrequently all three are brought together as the apostle strives to give some adequate expression to his sense of indebtedness to the Divine source of all good for blessings received, or to his longing on behalf of himself or of his readers for further communion with the God of grace. It is regular for him to begin his Epistles with a prayer for “grace and peace” for his readers, “from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ,” as the joint source of these Divine blessings by way of eminence (Rom. 1:7; 1Cor. 1:3; 2Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; 2Th. 1:2; 1Tim. 1:2; 2Tim. 1:2; Philem. ver. 3; cf. 1Th. 1:1). It is

obviously no departure from this habit in the essence of the matter, but only in relative fullness of expression, when in the opening words of the Epistle to the Colossians the clause “and the Lord Jesus Christ” is omitted, and we read merely: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father.” So also it would have been no departure from it in the essence of the matter, but only in relative fullness of expression, if in any instance the name of the Holy Spirit had chanced to be adjoined to the other two, as in the single instance of 2Cor. 13:14 it is adjoined to them in the closing prayer for grace with which Paul ends his letters, and which ordinarily takes the simple form of, “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you” (Rom. 16:20; 1Cor. 16:23; Gal. 6:18; Phil. 4:23; 1Th. 5:28; 2Th. 3:18; Philem. ver. 25; more expanded form, Eph. 6:23, 24; more compressed, Col. 4:18; 1Tim. 6:21; 2Tim. 4:22; Tit. 3:15).

Between these opening and closing passages the allusions to God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit are constant and most intricately interlaced. Paul’s monotheism is intense: the first premise of all his thought on Divine things is the unity of God (Rom. iii. 30; 1Cor. 8:4; Gal 3:20; Eph. 4:6; 1Tim. 2:5; cf. Rom. 16:22; 1Tim. 1:17). Yet to him God the Father is no more God than the Lord Jesus Christ is God, or the Holy Spirit is God. The Spirit of God is to him related to God as the spirit of man is to man (1Cor. 2:11), and therefore if the Spirit of God dwells in us, that is God dwelling in us (Rom. 8:10 ff.), and we are by that fact constituted temples of God (1Cor. 3:16). And no expression is too strong for him to use in order to assert the Godhead of Christ: He is “our great God” (Tit. 2:13); He is “God over all” (Rom. 9:5); and indeed it is expressly declared of Him that the “fullness of the Godhead,” that is, everything that enters into Godhead and constitutes it Godhead, dwells in Him. In the very act of asserting his monotheism Paul takes Our Lord up into this unique Godhead. “There is no God but one,” he roundly asserts, and then illustrates and proves this assertion by remarking that the heathen may have “gods many, and lords many,” but “to us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we unto him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we through him” (1Cor. 8:6). Obviously, this “one God, the Father,” and “one Lord, Jesus Christ,” are embraced together in the one God who alone is. Paul’s conception of the one God, whom alone he worships, includes, in other words, a recognition that within the unity of His Being, there exists such a distinction of Persons as is given us in the “one God, the Father” and the “one Lord, Jesus Christ.”

In numerous passages scattered through Paul’s Epistles, from the earliest of them (1Th. 1:2-5; 2Th. 2:13, 14) to the latest (Tit. 3:4-6; 2Tim. 1:3, 13,14), all three Persons, God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, are brought together, in the most incidental manner, as co-sources of all the saving blessings which come to believers in Christ. A typical series of such passages may be found in Eph. 2:18; 3:2-5,14, 17; 4:4-6; 5:18-20. But the most interesting instances are offered to us perhaps by the Epistles to the Corinthians. In 1Cor. 12:4-6 Paul presents the abounding spiritual gifts with which the church was blessed in a threefold aspect, and connects these aspects with the three Divine Persons. “Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are diversities of ministrations, and the same Lord. And there are diversities of workings, but the same God, who works all things in all.” It may be thought that there is a measure of what might almost be called artificiality in assigning the endowments of the church, as they are graces to the Spirit, as they are services to Christ, and as they are energizings to God. But thus there is only the more strikingly revealed the underlying Trinitarian conception as dominating the structure of the clauses: Paul clearly so writes, not because “gifts,” “workings,” “operations” stand out in his thought as greatly diverse things, but because God, the Lord, and the Spirit lie in the back of his mind constantly suggesting a threefold causality behind every manifestation of grace. The Trinity is alluded to rather than asserted; but it is so alluded to as to show that it constitutes the determining basis of all Paul’s thought of the God of redemption. Even more instructive is 2Cor. 13:14, which has passed into general liturgical use in the churches as a benediction: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.” Here the three highest redemptive blessings are brought together, and attached distributively, to the three Persons of the Triune God. There is again no formal teaching of the doctrine of the Trinity; there is only another instance of natural speaking out of a Trinitarian consciousness. Paul is simply thinking of the Divine source of

these great blessings; but he habitually thinks of this Divine source of redemptive blessings after a trinal fashion. He therefore does not say, as he might just as well have said, “The grace and love and communion of God be with you all,” but “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.” Thus he bears, almost unconsciously but most richly, witness to the trinal composition of the Godhead as conceived by Him.

The phenomena of Paul’s Epistles are repeated in the other writings of the New Testament. In these other writings also it is everywhere assumed that the redemptive activities of God rest on a threefold source in God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit; and these three Persons repeatedly come forward together in the expressions of Christian hope or the aspirations of Christian devotion (e. g., Heb. 2:3, 4; 6:4-6; 10:29-31; 1 Pet. 1:2; 2:3-12; 4:13-19; 1Jn. 5:4-8; Jude vs. 20, 21; Rev. 1:4-6). Perhaps as typical instances as any are supplied by the two following: “According to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ” (1Pet. 1:2); “Praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life” (Jude vs. 20, 21). To these may be added the highly symbolical instance from the Apocalypse: ‘Grace to you and peace from Him which is and was and which is to come; and from the Seven Spirits which are before His throne; and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth’ (Rev. 1:4, 5).

Clearly these writers, too, write out of a fixed Trinitarian consciousness and bear their testimony to the universal understanding current in apostolical circles. Everywhere and by all it was fully understood that the one God whom Christians worshipped and from whom alone they expected redemption and all that redemption brought with it, included within His undiminished unity the three: God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, whose activities relatively to one another are conceived as distinctly personal. This is the uniform and pervasive testimony of the New Testament, and it is the more impressive that it is given with such unstudied naturalness and simplicity, with no effort to distinguish between what have come to be called the ontological and the economical aspects of the Trinitarian distinctions, and indeed without apparent consciousness of the existence of such a distinction of aspects. Whether God is thought of in Himself or in His operations, the underlying conception runs unaffectedly into trinal forms.

It will not have escaped observation that the Trinitarian terminology of Paul and the other writers of the New Testament is not precisely identical with that of Our Lord as recorded for us in His discourses. Paul, for example – and the same is true of the other New Testament writers (except John) – does not speak, as Our Lord is recorded as speaking, of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, so much as of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. This difference of terminology finds its account in large measure in the different relations in which the speakers stand to the Trinity. Our Lord could not naturally speak of Himself, as one of the Trinitarian Persons, by the designation of “the Lord,” while the designation of “the Son,” expressing as it does His consciousness of close relation, and indeed of exact similarity, to God, came naturally to His lips. But He was Paul’s Lord; and Paul naturally thought and spoke of Him as such. In point of fact, “Lord” is one of Paul’s favorite designations of Christ, and indeed has become with him practically a proper name for Christ, and in point of fact, his Divine Name for Christ. It is naturally, therefore, his Trinitarian name for Christ. Because when he thinks of Christ as Divine he calls Him “Lord,” he naturally, when he thinks of the three Persons together as the Triune God, sets Him as “Lord” by the side of God – Paul’s constant name for “the Father” – and the Holy Spirit. Question may no doubt be raised whether it would have been possible for Paul to have done this, especially with the constancy with which he has done it, if, in his conception of it, the very essence of the Trinity were enshrined in the terms “Father” and “Son.” Paul is thinking of the Trinity, to be sure, from the point of view of a worshipper, rather than from that of a systematizer.

He designates the Persons of the Trinity therefore rather from his relations to them than from their relations to one another. He sees in the Trinity his God, his Lord, and the Holy Spirit who dwells in him; and naturally he so speaks currently of the three Persons. It remains remarkable, nevertheless, if the very essence of the Trinity were thought of by him as resident in the terms "Father," "Son," that in his numerous allusions to the Trinity in the Godhead, he never betrays any sense of this. It is noticeable also that in their allusions to the Trinity, there is preserved, neither in Paul nor in the other writers of the New Testament, the order of the names as they stand in Our Lord's great declaration (Mt. 28:19). The reverse order occurs, indeed, occasionally, as, for example, in 1Cor. 12:4-6 (cf. Eph. 4:4-6); and this may be understood as a climactic arrangement and so far a testimony to the order of Mt. 28:19. But the order is very variable; and in the most formal enumeration of the three Persons, that of 2Cor. 13:14, it stands thus: Lord, God, Spirit. The question naturally suggests itself whether the order Father, Son, Spirit was especially significant to Paul and his fellow-writers of the New Testament. If in their conviction the very essence of the doctrine of the Trinity was embodied in this order, should we not anticipate that there should appear in their numerous allusions to the Trinity some suggestion of this conviction?

Such facts as these have a bearing upon the testimony of the New Testament to the interrelations of the Persons of the Trinity. To the fact of the Trinity – to the fact, that is, that in the unity of the Godhead there subsist three Persons, each of whom has his particular part in the working out of salvation – the New Testament testimony is clear, consistent, pervasive and conclusive. There is included in this testimony constant and decisive witness to the complete and undiminished Deity of each of these Persons; no language is too exalted to apply to each of them in turn in the effort to give expression to the writer's sense of His Deity: the name that is given to each is fully understood to be "the name that is above every name." When we attempt to press the inquiry behind the broad fact, however, with a view to ascertaining exactly how the New Testament writers conceive the three Persons to be related, the one to the other, we meet with great difficulties. Nothing could seem more natural, for example, than to assume that the mutual relations of the Persons of the Trinity are revealed in the designations, "the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit," which are given them by Our Lord in the solemn formula of Mt. 28:19. Our confidence in this assumption is somewhat shaken, however, when we observe, as we have just observed, that these designations are not carefully preserved in their allusions to the Trinity by the writers of the New Testament at large, but are characteristic only of Our Lord's allusions and those of John, whose modes of speech in general very closely resemble those of Our Lord. Our confidence is still further shaken when we observe that the implications with respect to the mutual relations of the Trinitarian Persons, which are ordinarily derived from these designations, do not so certainly lie in them as is commonly supposed.

It may be very natural to see in the designation "Son" an intimation of subordination and derivation of Being, and it may not be difficult to ascribe a similar connotation to the term "Spirit." But it is quite certain that this was not the denotation of either term in the Semitic consciousness, which underlies the phraseology of Scripture; and it may even be thought doubtful whether it was included even in their remoter suggestions. What underlies the conception of sonship in Scriptural speech is just "likeness"; whatever the father is that the son is also. The emphatic application of the term "Son" to one of the Trinitarian Persons, accordingly, asserts rather His equality with the Father than His subordination to the Father; and if there is any implication of derivation in it, it would appear to be very distant. The adjunction of the adjective "only begotten" (Jn. 1:14; 3:16-18; 1Jn. 4:9) need add only the idea of uniqueness, not of derivation (Ps. 22:20; 25:16; 35:17; Wisdom 7:22 ff.); and even such a phrase as "God only begotten" (Jn. 1:18 ff.) may contain no implication of derivation, but only of absolutely unique consubstantiality; as also such a phrase as "the first-begotten of all creation" (Col. 1:15) may convey no intimation of coming into being, but merely assert priority of existence. In like manner, the designation "Spirit of God" or "Spirit of Jehovah," which meets us frequently in the Old Testament, certainly does not convey the idea there either of derivation or of subordination, but is just the executive name of God – the designation of God from the point of view of His activity – and imports accordingly identity with God; and there is no reason to suppose that, in passing from the Old Testament to the New Testament, the term

has taken on an essentially different meaning. It happens, oddly enough, moreover, that we have in the New Testament itself what amounts almost to formal definitions of the two terms “Son” and “Spirit,” and in both cases the stress is laid on the notion of equality or sameness. In Jn. 5:18 we read: ‘On this account, therefore, the Jews sought the more to kill him, because, not only did he break the Sabbath, but also called God his own Father, making himself equal to God.’ The point lies, of course, in the adjective “own.” Jesus was, rightly, understood to call God “his own Father,” that is, to use the terms “Father” and “Son” not in a merely figurative sense, as when Israel was called God’s son, but in the real sense. And this was understood to be claiming to be all that God is. To be the Son of God in any sense was to be like God in that sense; to be God’s own Son was to be exactly like God, to be “equal with God.”

Similarly, we read in 1Cor. 2:10,11: ‘For the Spirit searches all things, yea, the deep things of God. For who of men knows the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? Even so the things of God none knows, save the Spirit of God.’ Here the Spirit appears as the substrate of the Divine self-consciousness, the principle of God’s knowledge of Himself: He is, in a word, just God Himself in the innermost essence of His Being. As the spirit of man is the seat of human life, the very life of man itself, so the Spirit of God is His very life-element. How can He be supposed, then, to be subordinate to God, or to derive His Being from God? If, however, the subordination of the Son and Spirit to the Father in modes of subsistence and their derivation from the Father are not implicates of their designation as Son and Spirit, it will be hard to find in the New Testament compelling evidence of their subordination and derivation.

There is, of course, no question that in “modes of operation,” as it is technically called – that is to say, in the functions ascribed to the several Persons of the Trinity in the redemptive process, and, more broadly, in the entire dealing of God with the world – the principle of subordination is clearly expressed. The Father is first, the Son is second, and the Spirit is third, in the operations of God as revealed to us in general, and very especially in those operations by which redemption is accomplished. Whatever the Father does, He does through the Son (Rom. 2:16; 3:22; 5:1,11,17,21; Eph. 1:5; 1Th. 5:9; Tit. 3:5) by the Spirit. The Son is sent by the Father and does His Father’s will (Jn. 6:38); the Spirit is sent by the Son and does not speak from Himself, but only takes of Christ’s and shows it unto His people (Jn. 17:7 ff.); and we have Our Lord’s own word for it that ‘one that is sent is not greater than he that sent him’ (Jn. 13:16). In crisp decisiveness, Our Lord even declares, indeed: ‘My Father is greater than I’ (Jn. 14:28); and Paul tells us that Christ is God’s, even as we are Christ’s (1Cor. 3:23), and that as Christ is “the head of every man,” so God is “the head of Christ” (1Cor. 11:3).

But it is not so clear that the principle of subordination rules also in “modes of subsistence,” as it is technically phrased; that is to say, in the necessary relation of the Persons of the Trinity to one another. The very richness and variety of the expression of their subordination, the one to the other, in modes of operation, create a difficulty in attaining certainty whether they are represented as also subordinate the one to the other in modes of subsistence. Question is raised in each case of apparent intimation of subordination in modes of subsistence, whether it may not, after all, be explicable as only another expression of subordination in modes of operation. It may be natural to assume that a subordination in modes of operation rests on a subordination in modes of subsistence; that the reason why it is the Father that sends the Son and the Son that sends the Spirit is that the Son is subordinate to the Father, and the Spirit to the Son. But we are bound to bear in mind that these relations of subordination in modes of operation may just as well be due to a convention, an agreement, between the Persons of the Trinity – a “Covenant” as it is technically called – by virtue of which a distinct function in the work of redemption is voluntarily assumed by each. It is eminently desirable, therefore, at the least, that some definite evidence of subordination in modes of subsistence should be discoverable before it is assumed. In the case of the relation of the Son to the Father, there is the added difficulty of the incarnation, in which the Son, by the assumption of a creaturely nature into union with Himself, enters into new relations with the Father of a definitely subordinate character. Question has even been raised whether the very designations of Father

and Son may not be expressive of these new relations, and therefore without significance with respect to the eternal relations of the Persons so designated. This question must certainly be answered in the negative.

Although, no doubt, in many of the instances in which the terms “Father” and “Son” occur, it would be possible to take them of merely economical relations, there ever remain some which are intractable to this treatment, and we may be sure that “Father” and “Son” are applied to their eternal and necessary relations. But these terms, as we have seen, do not appear to imply relations of first and second, superiority and subordination, in modes of subsistence; and the fact of the humiliation of the Son of God for His earthly work does introduce a factor into the interpretation of the passages which import His subordination to the Father, which throws doubt upon the inference from them of an eternal relation of subordination in the Trinity itself. It must at least be said that in the presence of the great New Testament doctrines of the Covenant of Redemption on the one hand, and of the Humiliation of the Son of God for His work’s sake and of the Two Natures in the constitution of His Person as incarnated, on the other, the difficulty of interpreting subordinationist passages of eternal relations between the Father and Son becomes extreme. The question continually obtrudes itself, whether they do not rather find their full explanation in the facts embodied in the doctrines of the Covenant, the Humiliation of Christ, and the Two Natures of His incarnated Person. Certainly in such circumstances it were thoroughly illegitimate to press such passages to suggest any subordination for the Son or the Spirit which would in any manner impair that complete identity with the Father in Being and that complete equality with the Father in powers which are constantly presupposed, and frequently emphatically, though only incidentally, asserted for them throughout the whole fabric of the New Testament.

The Trinity of the Persons of the Godhead, shown in the incarnation and the redemptive work of God the Son, and the descent and saving work of God the Spirit, is thus everywhere assumed in the New Testament, and comes to repeated fragmentary but none the less emphatic and illuminating expression in its pages. As the roots of its revelation are set in the threefold Divine causality of the saving process, it naturally finds an echo also in the consciousness of everyone who has experienced this salvation. Every redeemed soul, knowing himself reconciled with God through His Son, and quickened into newness of life by His Spirit, turns alike to Father, Son and Spirit with the exclamation of reverent gratitude upon his lips, “My Lord and my God!” If he could not construct the doctrine of the Trinity out of his consciousness of salvation, yet the elements of his consciousness of salvation are interpreted to him and reduced to order only by the doctrine of the Trinity which he finds underlying and giving their significance and consistency to the teaching of the Scriptures as to the processes of salvation. By means of this doctrine he is able to think clearly and consequently of his threefold relation to the saving God, experienced by Him as Fatherly love sending a Redeemer, as redeeming love executing redemption, as saving love applying redemption: all manifestations in distinct methods and by distinct agencies of the one seeking and saving love of God.

Without the doctrine of the Trinity, his conscious Christian life would be thrown into confusion and left in disorganization if not, indeed, given an air of unreality; with the doctrine of the Trinity, order, significance and reality are brought to every element of it. Accordingly, the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of redemption, historically, stand or fall together. A Unitarian¹² theology is commonly associated with a Pelagian anthropology¹³ and a Socinian soteriology.¹⁴ It is a striking testimony which is borne by F. E. Koenig (*Offenbarungsbegriff des AT*, 1882, I,125). I have learned that many cast off the whole history of redemption for no other reason than because they have not attained to a conception of the Triune God.” It is in this intimacy of relation between the doctrines of the Trinity and redemption that the

¹² Unitarianism rejects the Trinity; it considers God distinct from the Son and equates the Spirit with God.

¹³ That is, man is perfectly capable of being obedient to the law of God, and is saved only by his own obedience, not Christ’s.

¹⁴ Soteriology deals with the effect of Christ’s sacrifice. The Socinians rejected the Trinity and the divinity of Christ as well as the idea of original sin. In the style of Pelagius, Christ’s death was merely exemplary, not efficacious to salvation.

ultimate reason lies why the Christian church could not rest until it had attained a definite and well-compacted doctrine of the Trinity. Nothing else could be accepted as an adequate foundation for the experience of the Christian salvation. Neither the Sabellian¹⁵ nor the Arian¹⁶ construction could meet and satisfy the data of the consciousness of salvation, any more than either could meet and satisfy the data of the Scriptural revelation. The data of the Scriptural revelation might, to be sure, have been left unsatisfied: men might have found a *modus vivendi*¹⁷ with neglected, or even with perverted Scriptural teaching. But perverted or neglected elements of Christian experience are more clamant in their demands for attention and correction. The dissatisfied Christian consciousness necessarily searched the Scriptures, on the emergence of every new attempt to state the doctrine of the nature and relations of God, to see whether these things were true, and never reached contentment until the Scriptural data were given their consistent formulation in a valid doctrine of the Trinity. Here too the heart of man was restless until it found its rest in the Triune God, the author, procurer and applier of salvation.

The determining impulse to the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity in the church was the church's profound conviction of the absolute Deity of Christ, on which as on a pivot the whole Christian conception of God from the first origins of Christianity turned. The guiding principle in the formulation of the doctrine was supplied by the Baptismal Formula announced by Jesus (Mt. 28:19), from which was derived the ground-plan of the baptismal confessions and "rules of faith" which very soon began to be framed all over the church. It was by these two fundamental *principia* – the true Deity of Christ and the Baptismal Formula – that all attempts to formulate the Christian doctrine of God were tested, and by their molding power that the church at length found itself in possession of a form of statement which did full justice to the data of the redemptive revelation as reflected in the New Testament and the demands of the Christian heart under the experience of salvation.

In the nature of the case the formulated doctrine was of slow attainment. The influence of inherited conceptions and of current philosophies inevitably showed itself in the efforts to construe to the intellect the immanent faith of Christians. In the second century the dominant neo-Stoic and neo-Platonic ideas deflected Christian thought into subordinationist channels, and produced what is known as the Logos-Christology, which looks upon the Son as a prolation¹⁸ of Deity reduced to such dimensions as comported with relations with a world of time and space; meanwhile, to a great extent, the Spirit was neglected altogether. A reaction which, under the name of Monarchianism,¹⁹ identified the Father, Son, and Spirit so completely that they were thought of only as different aspects or different moments in the life of the one Divine Person, called now Father, now Son, now Spirit, as His several activities came successively into view, almost succeeded in establishing itself in the third century as the doctrine of the church at large. In the conflict between these two opposite tendencies the church gradually found its way, under the guidance of the Baptismal Formula elaborated into a "Rule of Faith," to a better and more well-balanced conception, until a real doctrine of the Trinity at length came to expression, particularly in the West, through the brilliant dialectic of Tertullian.

It was thus ready at hand, when, in the early years of the fourth century, the Logos-Christology, in opposition to dominant Sabellian tendencies, ran to seed in what is known as Arianism, to which the Son was a creature, though exalted above all other creatures as their Creator and Lord; and the church was

¹⁵ i.e. *modalism* – the Father, Son, and Spirit are the same God appearing in different modes – they are not distinct persons.

¹⁶ Arius taught that the Son was not eternal but was *created* by the Father, and therefore the Son was not God by nature. He had a changeable nature. His honor and dignity were earned from the Father by Jesus' righteous life on earth rather than being inherent in Jesus' identity as God. Jesus was not "consubstantial" with the Father (i.e. of the same substance). The Holy Spirit was begotten by the Logos (Christ) and therefore was less than either the Son or the Father.

¹⁷ A manner of living, way of life

¹⁸ That is, the physical generation of Christ from the Father in a corporeal way (a physical birthing of one being by another).

¹⁹ God is a single entity – two flavors of Monarchianism to account for Christ in the absence of a trinity are *modalism*, and *adoptionism*. In adoptionism, a natural man was specifically adopted by God to serve his purposes as the Messiah. He is granted his deity by God – he is not co-eternal. This is related to *docetism* in which a natural man is possessed by the deity.

thus prepared to assert its settled faith in a Triune God, one in being, but in whose unity there subsisted three consubstantial Persons. Under the leadership of Athanasius this doctrine was proclaimed as the faith of the church at the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D., and by his strenuous labors and those of “the three great Cappadocians,” the two Gregories and Basil, it gradually won its way to the actual acceptance of the entire church. It was at the hands of Augustine, however, a century later, that the doctrine thus become the church doctrine in fact as well as in theory, received its most complete elaboration and most carefully grounded statement. In the form which he gave it, and which is embodied in that “battle-hymn of the early church,” the so-called Athanasian Creed, it has retained its place as the fit expression of the faith of the church as to the nature of its God until today. The language in which it is couched, even in this final declaration, still retains elements of speech which owe their origin to the modes of thought characteristic of the Logos Christology of the second century, fixed in the nomenclature of the church by the Nicene Creed of 325 A.D., though carefully guarded there against the subordinationism inherent in the Logos-Christology, and made the vehicle rather of the Nicene doctrines of the eternal generation of the Son and procession of the Spirit, with the consequent subordination of the Son and Spirit to the Father in modes of subsistence as well as of operation.

In the Athanasian Creed, however, the principle of the equalization of the three Persons, which was already the dominant motive of the Nicene Creed – the *homoousia*²⁰ – is so strongly emphasized as practically to push out of sight, if not quite out of existence, these remanent²¹ suggestions of derivation and subordination. It has been found necessary, nevertheless, from time to time, vigorously to reassert the principle of equalization, over against a tendency unduly to emphasize the elements of subordinationism which still hold a place thus in the traditional language in which the church states its doctrine of the Trinity. In particular, it fell to Calvin, in the interests of the true Deity of Christ – the constant motive of the whole body of Trinitarian thought – to reassert and make good the attribute of self-existence (*autotheotos*) for the Son. Thus Calvin takes his place, alongside of Tertullian, Athanasius and Augustine, as one of the chief contributors to the exact and vital statement of the Christian doctrine of the Triune God.

Text Scanned and edited by Michael Bremmer

Corrections, notes, formatting, updated citations, and updated language by William H. Gross

*Our God
Sola Scriptura!*

²⁰ Greek “same substance” – the Son is not different than the Father in his substance as God, only in his subsistence as man.

²¹ i.e. remnant